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REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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MARCH 1944

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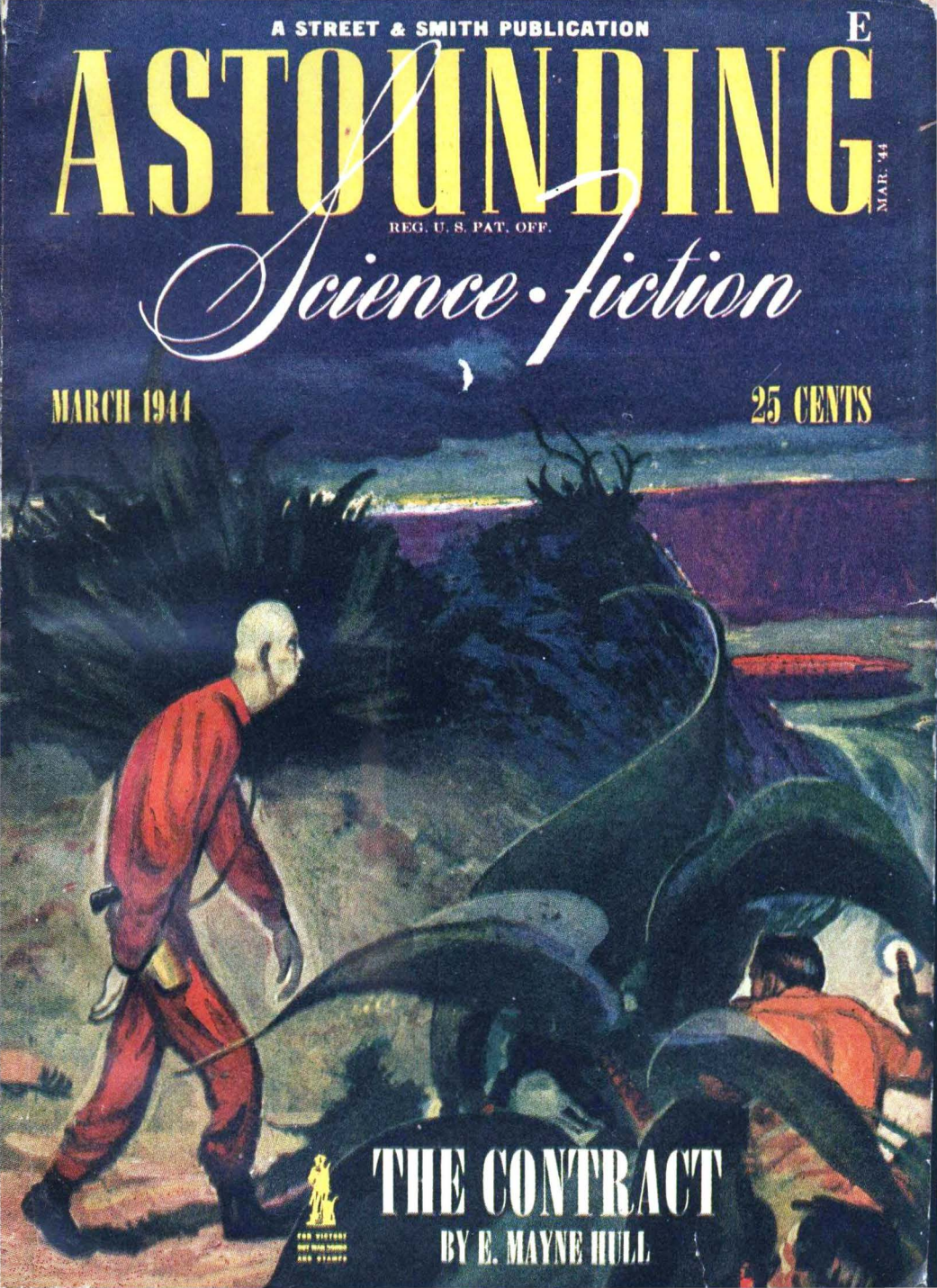
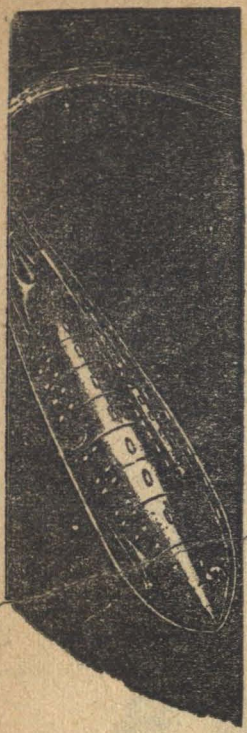


THE CONTRACT

BY E. MAYNE HULL



ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

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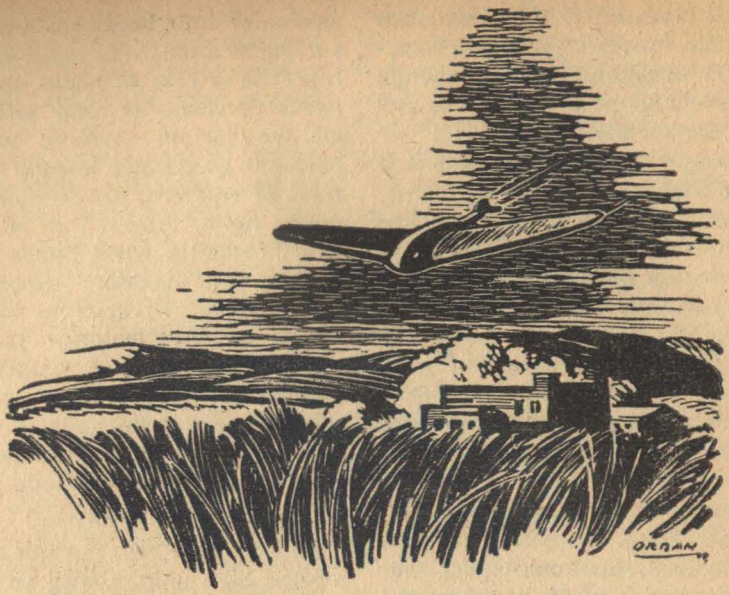


Deadline

by CLEVE CARTMILL

There was a bomb that he wanted to destroy. It was in an enemy nation's capital, and might explode at any moment. And that was precisely what he must prevent!

Illustrated by Orban

Heavy flak burst above and below the flight of bombers as they flashed across the night sky of the planet Cathor. Ybor Sebrof grinned as he nosed his glider at a steep angle away from the fireworks. The bombers had accomplished their mission: they had dropped him near Nilreq, had simulated a raid.

He had cut loose before searchlights slatted the sky with lean, white arms. They hadn't touched the glider, marked with their own insignia. Their own glider, in fact, captured when Seilla advance col-

umns had caught the Namo garrison asleep. He would leave it where he landed, and let Sixa intelligence try to figure out how it got there.

Provided, of course, that he landed unseen.

Sixa intelligence officers would have another job, too. That was to explain the apparent bombing raid that dropped no bombs. None of the Seilla planes had been hit, and the Sixa crowd couldn't know that the bombers were empty: no bombs, no crews, just speed.

He could see tomorrow's papers, hear tomorrow's newscasts. "Raiders driven off. Craven Democracy pilots cringe from Nilreq ack-ack." But the big bugs would worry. The Seilla planes *could* have dropped bombs, if they'd had any bombs. They had flitted across the great industrial city with impunity. They could have laid their eggs. The big bugs would wonder about that. Why? they would ask each other profoundly. What was the reason?

Ybor grinned. He was the reason. He'd make them wish there *had* been bombs instead of him. Possibility of failure never entered his mind. All he had to do was to penetrate into the stronghold of the enemy, find Dr. Sitruc, kill him, and destroy the most devastating weapon of history. That was all.

He caught a sharp breath as a farmhouse loomed some distance ahead, and veered over against the dark edge of a wood. The green-gray plane would be invisible against that background, unless keen eyes caught its shadow under a fugitive moon.

He glided silently now, on a little wind that gossiped with treetops. Only the wind and the trees remarked on his passing. They could keep the secret.

He landed in a field of grain that whispered fierce protest as the glider whished through its heavy-laden plumes. These waved above the level of the motorless ship, and Ybor decided that it would not be seen before harvesting machines gathered the grain.

The air was another problem. He did not want the glider discovered just yet, particularly if he should be intercepted on his journey into the enemy capital. Elementary intelligence would connect him with this abandoned ship if he were stopped in this vicinity for any reason, and if the ship should be discovered on the morrow.

He took a long knife from its built-in sheath in the glider and laid about him with it until he had cut several armloads of grain. He scattered these haphazardly—not in any pattern—over parts of the ship. It wouldn't look like a glider now, even from the air.

He pushed through the shoulder-high growth to the edge of the wood.

He moved stealthily here. It was almost a certainty that big guns were hidden here, and he must avoid discovery. He slipped along the soft carpet of vegetation like a nocturnal cat, running on all fours under low branches, erect when possible.

A sharp scent of danger assailed his nostrils, and he crouched motionless while he sifted this odor. It made a picture in his head: men, and oil, and the acrid smoke of exploded gases. A gun crew was directly ahead.

Ybor took to the trees. He moved from one to the other, with no more sound than soft-winged night birds, and approached the source of the odor. He paused now and then, listening for a sentry's footsteps. He heard them presently, a soft *pad-pad* which mingled, in different rhythm, with snores which became audible on the light wind.

The better part of valor, Ybor knew, was to circle this place, to leave the sentry unaware of his passage through the wood. But habit was too strong. He must destroy, for they were the enemy.

He moved closer to the sound of footsteps. Presently, he crouched above the line of the sentry's march, searching the darkness with eye and ear. The guard passed below, and Ybor let him go. His ears strained through snores from nearby tents until he heard another guard. Two were on sentry duty.

He pulled the knife from his belt and waited. When the sentry shuffled below him, Ybor dropped soundlessly onto the man's shoulders, stabbing as he fell.

There was a little noise. Not much, but a little. Enough to bring a low-voiced hail from the other guard.

"Namreh?" called the guard. "What happened?"

Ybor grunted, took the dead man's gun and helmet and took over his beat. He marched with the same rhythm the enemy feet had maintained until he met the second guard. Ybor silenced questions with a swift slash of the knife, and then turned his attention to the tents.

Presently, it was done. He clamped the fingers of the first guard around the knife hilt and went away. Let them think that one of their men had gone mad and killed the others before suiciding. Let the psychologists get a little work-out on this.

When he had penetrated to the far edge of the wood, dawn had splashed pale color beyond Nilreq, pulling jumbled buildings into dark silhouette. There lay his area of operations. There, perhaps, lay his destiny, and the destiny of the whole race.

This latter thought was not born of rhetorical hyperbole. It was cold, hard fact. It had nothing to do with patriotism, nor was it concerned with politico-economic philosophy. It was concerned with a scientific fact only: if the weapon, which was somewhere in the enemy capital, were used, the entire race might very well perish down to the last man.

Now began the difficult part of Ybor's task. He started to step out of the wood. A slight sound from behind froze him for the fraction of a second while he identified it. Then, in one incredibly swift mo-

tion, he whirled and flung himself at its source.

He knew he was fighting a woman after the first instant of contact. He was startled to some small extent, but not enough to impair his efficiency. A chopping blow, and she lay unconscious at his feet. He stood over her with narrowed eyes, unable to see what she looked like in the leafy gloom.

Then dawn burst like a salvo in the east, and he saw that she was young. Not immature, by any means, but young. When a spear of sunlight stabbed into the shadow, he saw that she was lovely.

Ybor pulled out his combat knife. She was an enemy, and must be destroyed. He raised his arm for the *coup de grace,* and held it there. He could not drive the blade into her. She seemed only to sleep, in her unconsciousness, with parted ripe lips and limp hands. You could kill a man while he slept, but Nature had planted a deep aversion in your instincts to killing a helpless female.

She began to moan softly. Presently she opened her wide brown eyes, soft as a captive fawn's.

"You hit me." She whispered the accusation.

Ybor said nothing.

"You hit me," she repeated.

"What did you expect?" he asked harshly. "Candy and flowers? What are you doing here?"

"Following you," she answered. "May I get up?"

"Yes. Why were you following?"

"When I saw you land in our field, I wondered why. I ran out to see you cover your ship and slip into the woods. I followed."

Ybor was incredulous. "You followed me through those woods?"

"I could have touched you," she said. "Any time."

"You lie!"

"Don't feel chagrined," she said. She flowed to her feet in a liquid movement. Her eyes were almost on a level with his. Her smile showed small, white teeth. "I'm very good at that sort of thing," she said. "Better than almost anybody, though I admit you're no slouch."

"Thanks," he said shortly. "All right, let's hear the story. Most likely it'll be the last you'll ever tell. What's your game?"

"You speak Ynamren like a native," the girl said.

Ybor's eyes glinted. "I am a native."

She smiled her disbelief. "And you kill your own soldiers? I think not. I saw you wipe out that gun crew. There was too much objectivity about you. One of us would do it with hatred. For you, it was a tactical maneuver."

"You're cutting your own throat," Ybor warned. "I can't let you go. You're too observing."

She repeated, "I think not." After a pause, she said, "You'll need help, whatever your mission. I can offer it."

He was contemptuous. "You offer my head a lion's mouth. I can hide it there? I need no help. Especially from anybody clumsy

enough to be caught. And I've caught you, my pretty."

She flushed. "You were about to storm a rampart. I saw it in your odd face as you stared toward Nilreq. I caught my breath with hope that you could. That's what you heard. If I'd thought you were my enemy, you'd have heard nothing. Except, maybe, the song of my knife blade as it reached your heart."

"What's odd about my face?" he demanded. "It'd pass in a crowd without notice."

"Women would notice it," she said. "It's lopsided."

He shrugged aside the personal issue. He took her throat in his hands. "I have to do this," he said. "It's highly important that nobody knows of my presence here. This is war. I can't afford to be humane."

She offered no resistance. Quietly, she looked up at him and asked, "Have you heard of Ylas?"

His fingers did not close on the soft flesh. "Who has not?"

"I am Ylas," she said.

"A trick."

"No trick. Let me show you." As his eyes narrowed, "No, I have no papers, of course. Listen. You know Mulb, Sworb, and Nomos? I got them away."

Ybor hesitated. She could be Ylas, but it would be a fantastic stroke of luck to run into the fabulous director of Ynamre's underground so soon. It was almost beyond belief. Yet, there was a chance she was telling the truth. He couldn't overlook that chance.

"Names," he said. "You could have heard them anywhere."

"Nomos has a new-moon scar on his wrist," she said. "Sworb is tall, almost as tall as you, and his shoulders droop slightly. He talks so fast you can hardly follow. Mulb is a dope. He gets by on his pontifical manner."

These, Ybor reflected, were crisp thumbnail sketches.

She pressed her advantage. "Would I have stood by while you killed that gun crew if I were a loyal member of the Sixa Alliance? Wouldn't I have cried a warning when you killed the first guard and took his helmet and gun?"

There was logic in this, Ybor thought.

"Wasn't it obvious to me," she went on, "that you were a Seilla agent from the moment that you landed in my grain field? I could have telephoned the authorities."

Ybor took his hands from her throat. "I want to see Dr. Sitruc," he said.

She frowned off toward Nilreq, at towers golden in morning sunlight. Ybor noted indifferently that she made a colorful picture with her face to the sun. A dark flower, opening toward the dawn. Not that it mattered. He had no time for her. He had little time for anything.

"That will take some doing," she said.

He turned away. "Then I'll do it myself. Time is short."

"Wait!" Her voice had a quality which caused him to turn. He

smiled sourly at the gun in her hand.

Self-contempt blackened Ybor's thoughts. He had had her helpless, but he had thought of her as a woman, not as an armed enemy. He hadn't searched her because of callow sentimentality. He had scaled the heights of stupidity, and now would plunge to his deserved end. Her gun was steady, and purpose shone darkly in her eyes.

"I'm a pushover for a fairy tale," she said. "I thought for a while that you really were a Seilla agent. How fiendishly clever you are, you and your council! I should have known when those planes went over. They went too fast."

Ybor said nothing. He was trying to absorb this.

"It was a smart idea," she went on in her acid, bitter voice. "They towed you over, and you landed in my field. A coincidence, when you come to think of it. I have been in that farmhouse only three days. Of all places, you pick it. Not by accident, not so. You and the other big minds on the Sixa council knew the planes would bring me to my window, knew my eyes would catch the shadow of your glider, knew I'd investigate. You even killed six of your own men, to dull my suspicions. Oh, I was taken in for a while."

"You talk like a crazy woman," Ybor said. "Put away that gun."

"When you had a chance to kill me and didn't," she said, "my last suspicion died. The more fool I. No, my bucko, you are not going back to report my whereabouts, to have your goons wait until my committee meets and catch us all. Not so. You die here and now."

Thoughts raced through Ybor's head. It would be a waste of energy to appeal to her on the ground that if she killed him she would in effect destroy her species. That smacked of oratory. He needed a simple appeal, crisp and startling. But what? His time was running short; he could see it in her dark eyes.

"Your last address," he said, remembering Sworb's tale of escape, "was 40 Curk Way. You sold pastries, and Sworb got sick on little cakes. He was sick in your truck, as it carted him away at eleven minutes past midnight."

Bull's eye. Determination to kill went out of her eyes as she remembered. She was thoughtful for a moment.

Then her eyes glinted. "I've not heard that he reached Acireb safely. You could have caught him across the Enarta border and beaten the truth out of him. Still," she reflected, "you may be telling the truth . . ."

"I am," Ybor said quietly. "I am a Seilla agent, here on a highly important mission. If you can't aid me directly, you must let me go. At once."

"You might be lying, too, though. I can't take the chance. You will march ahead of me around the wood. If you make one overt move, or even a move that I don't understand, I'll kill you."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my house. Where else? Then we'll talk."

"Now listen to me," he said passionately, "there is no time for—"

"March!"

He marched.

Ybor's plan to take her unawares when they were inside the farmhouse dissolved when he saw the great hulk who admitted them. This was a lumpish brute with the most powerful body Ybor had ever seen, towering over his own more than average height. The man's arms were as thick as Ybor's thighs, and the yellow eyes were small and vicious. Yet, apelike though he was, the giant moved like a mountain cat, without sound, with deceptive swiftness.

"Guard him," the girl commanded, and Ybor knew the yellow eyes would not leave him.

He sank into a chair, an old chair with a primitive tail slot, and watched the girl as she busied herself at the mountainous cooking range. This kitchen could accommodate a score of farmhands, and that multiple-burner stove could turn out hot meals for all.

"We'd better eat," she said. "If you're not lying, you'll need strength. If you are, you can withstand torture long enough to tell us the truth."

"You're making a mistake," Ybor began hotly, but stopped when the guard made a menacing gesture.

She had a meal on the table soon. It was a good meal, and he ate it heartily. "The condemned man," he said, and smiled.

For a camaraderie had sprung up between them. He was male, not too long past his youth, with clear, dark eyes, and he was put together with an eye to efficiency; and she was female, at the ripening

stage. The homely task of preparing a meal, of sharing it, lessened the tension between them. She gave him a fleeting, occasional smile as he tore into his food.

"You're a good cook," he said, when they had finished.

Warmth went out of her. She eyed him steadily. "Now," she said crisply. "Proof."

Ybor shrugged angrily. "Do you think I carry papers identifying me as a Seilla agent? 'To whom it may concern, bearer is high in Seilla councils. Any aid you may give him will be appreciated.' I have papers showing that I'm a newspaper man from Eeras. The newspaper offices and building have been destroyed by now, and there is no means of checking."

She thought this over. "I'm going to give you a chance," she said. "If you're a top-flight Seilla agent, one of your Nilreq men can identify you. Name one, and we'll get him here."

"None of them know me by sight. My face was altered before I came on this assignment, so that nobody could give me away, even accidentally."

"You know all the answers, don't you?" she scoffed. "Well, we will now take you into the cellar and get the truth from you. And you won't die until we do. We'll keep you alive, one way or another."

"Wait a moment," Ybor said. "There is one man who will know me. He may not have arrived. Solraq."

"He came yesterday," she said. "Very well. If he identifies you, that will be good enough. Sleyg," she said to the huge guard, "fetch Solraq."

Sleyg rumbled deep in his throat, and she made an impatient gesture. "I can take care of myself. Go!" She reached inside her blouse, took her gun from its shoulder holster and pointed it across the table at Ybor. "You will sit still."

Sleyg went out. Ybor heard a car start, and the sound of its motor faded rapidly.

"May I smoke?" Ybor asked.

"Certainly." With her free hand she tossed a pack of cigarettes across the table. He lighted one, careful to keep his hands in sight, handed it to her, and applied flame to his own. "So you're Ylas," he said conversationally.

She didn't bother to reply.

"You've done a good job," he went on. "Right under their noses. You must have had some close calls."

She smiled tolerantly. "Don't be devious, chum. On the off chance that you might escape, I'll give you no data to use later."

"There won't be any later if I don't get out of here. For you, or anybody."

"Now you're melodramatic. There'll always be a later, as long as there's time."

"Time exists only in consciousness," he said. "There won't be any time, unless dust and rocks are aware of it."

"That's quite a picture of destruction you paint."

"It will be quite a destruction.

And you're bringing it nearer every minute. You're cutting down the time margin in which it can be averted."

She grinned. "Ain't I nasty?"

"Even if you let me go this moment—" he began.

"Which I won't."

"—the catastrophe might not be averted. Our minds can't conceive the unimaginable violence which might very well destroy all animate life. It's a queer picture," he mused, "even to think about. Imagine space travelers of the future sighting this planet empty of life, overgrown with jungles. It wouldn't even have a name. Oh, they'd find the name. All traces of civilization wouldn't be completely destroyed. They'd poke in the crumbled ruins and find bits of history. Then they'd go back to their home planet with the mystery of Cathor. Why did all life disappear from Cathor? They'd find skeletons enough to show our size and shape, and they'd decipher such records as were found. But nowhere would they find even a hint of the reason our civilization was destroyed. Nowhere would they find the name of Ylas, the reason."

She merely grinned.

"That's how serious it is," Ybor concluded. "Not a bird in the sky, not a pig in a sty. Perhaps no insects, even. I wonder," he said thoughtfully, "if such explosions destroyed life in other planets in our system. Lara, for example. It *had* life, once. Did civilization rise to a peak there, and end in a war that involved every single person on one side or another? Did one side, in desperation, try to use an explosive available to both but uncontrollable, and so lose the world?"

"Shh!" she commanded. She was stiff, listening.

He heard it then, the rhythmic tramp of feet. He flicked a glance through the window toward the wood. "Ynamre," he said.

A sergeant marched a squad of eight soldiers across the field toward the house. Ybor turned to the girl.

"You've got to hide me! Quick!"

She stared at him coldly. "I have no place."

"You must have. You must take care of refugees. Where is it?"

"Maybe you've caught me," she said grimly, "but you'll learn nothing. The Underground will carry on."

"You little fool! I'm with you."

"That's what you say. I haven't any proof."

Ybor wasted no more time. The squad was almost at the door. He leaped over against the wall and squatted there. He pulled his coat half off, shook black hair over his eyes, and slacked his face so that it took on the loose, formless expression of an idiot. He began to play with his fingers, and gurgled.

A pounding rifle butt took the girl to the door. Ybor did not look up. He twisted his fingers and gurgled at them.

"Did you hear anything last night?" the sergeant demanded.

"Anything?" she echoed. "Some planes, some guns."

"Did you get up? Did you look out?"

"I was afraid," she answered meekly.

He spat contemptuously. There was a short silence, disturbed only by Ybor's gurgling.

"Who's that?" the sergeant snapped. He stamped across the room, jerked Ybor's head up by the lock of hair. Ybor gave him an insane, slobbering grin. The sergeant's eyes were contemptuous. "Dummy!" he snarled. He jerked his hand away. "Why don't you kill it?" he asked the girl. "All the more food for you. Sa-a-a-y," he said, as if he'd seen her for the first time, "not bad, not bad. I'll be up to see you, cookie, one of these nights."

Ybor didn't move until they were out of hearing. He got to his feet then, and looked grimly at Ylas. "I could have been in Nilreq by now. You'll have to get me away. They've discovered that gun crew, and will be on the lookout."

She had the gun in her hand again. She motioned him toward the chair. "Shall we sit down?"

"After that? You're still suspicious? You're a fool."

"Ah? I think not. That could have been a part of the trick, to lull my suspicions. Sit—down!"

He sat. He was through with talking. He thought of the soldiers' visit. That sergeant probably wouldn't recognize him if they should encounter each other. Still, it was something to keep in mind. One more face to remember, to dodge.

If only that big ape would get back with Solraq. His ears, as if on cue, caught the sound of an approaching motor. He was gratified to see that he heard it a full second before Ylas. Her reflexes weren't so fast, after all.

It was Sleyg, and Sleyg alone. He came into the house on his soft, cat feet. "Solraq," he reported, "is dead. Killed last night."

Ylas gave Ybor a smile. There was deadliness in it.

"How very convenient," she said, "for you. Doesn't it seem odd even to you, Mr. Sixa Intelligence Officer, that of all the Seilla agents you pick a man who is dead? I think this has gone far enough. Into the cellar with him, Sleyg. We'll get the truth this time. Even," she added to Ybor, "though it'll kill you."

This chair was made like a strait jacket, with an arrangement of clamps and straps that held him completely motionless. He could move nothing but his eyeballs.

Ylas inspected him. She nodded satisfaction. "Go heat your irons," she said to Sleyg. "First," she explained to Ybor, "we'll burn off your ears, a little at a time. If that doesn't wear you down, we'll get serious."

Ybor said, "I'll tell you the truth now."

She sneered at that. "No wonder the enemy is knocking at your gates. You were driven out of Aissu on the south, and Ytal on the

north. Now you are coming into your home country, because you're cowards."

"I'm convinced that you are Ylas," Ybor went on calmly. "And though my orders were that nobody should know of my mission, I think I can tell you. I must. I have no choice. Then listen. I was sent to Ynamre to—"

She cut him off with a fierce gesture. "The truth!"

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

"I don't want to hear another fairy tale."

"You are going to hear this, whether you like it or not. And you'll hold off your gorilla until I've finished. Or have the end of the race on your head."

Her lip curled. "Go on."

"Have you heard of U-235? It's an isotope of uranium."

"Who hasn't?"

"All right. I'm stating fact, not theory. U-235 has been separated in quantity easily sufficient for preliminary atomic-power research, and the like. They got it out of uranium ores by new atomic isotope separation methods; they now have quantities measured in pounds. By 'they', I mean Seilla research scientists. But they have *not* brought the whole amount together, or any major portion of it. Because they are not at all sure that, once started, it would stop before all of it had been consumed—in something like one micromicrosecond of time."

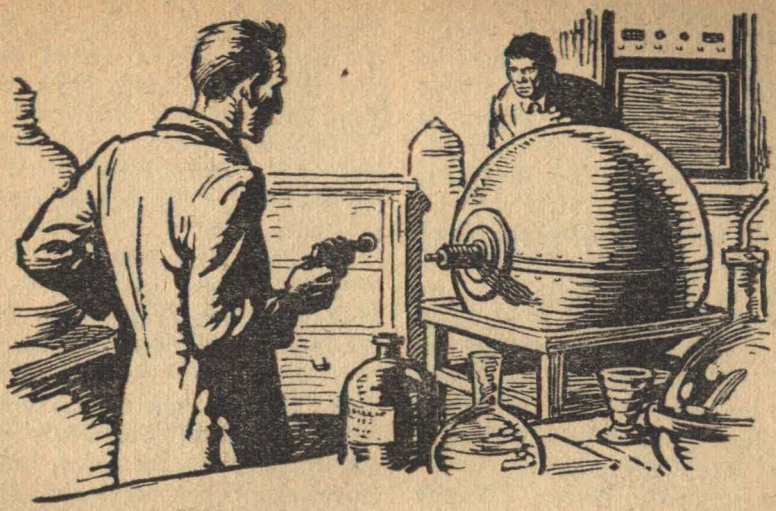
Sleyg came into the cellar. In one hand he carried a portable forge. In the other, a bundle of metal rods. Ylas motioned him to put them down in a corner. "Go up and keep watch," she ordered. "I'll call you."

A tiny exultation flickered in Ybor. He had won a concession. "Now the explosion of a pound of U-235," he said, "wouldn't be too unbearably violent, though it releases as much energy as a hundred million pounds of TNT. Set off on an island, it might lay waste the whole island, uprooting trees, killing all animal life, but even that fifty thousand tons of TNT wouldn't seriously disturb the really unimaginable tonnage which even a small island represents."

"I assume," she broke in, "that you're going to make a point? You're not just giving me a lecture on high explosives?"

"Wait. The trouble is, they're afraid that that explosion of energy would be so incomparably violent, its sheer, minute concentration of unbearable energy so great, that surrounding matter would be set off. If you could imagine concentrating half a billion of the most violent lightning strokes you ever saw, compressing all their fury into a space less than half the size of a pack of cigarettes—you'd get some idea of the concentrated essence of hyperviolence that explosion would represent. It's not simply the *amount* of energy; it's the frightful concentration of intensity in a minute volume.

"The surrounding matter, unable to maintain a self-supporting



atomic explosion normally, might be hyper-stimulated to atomic explosion under U-235's forces and, in the immediate neighborhood, release its energy, too. That is, the explosion would not involve only one pound of U-235, but also five or fifty or five thousand tons of other matter. The extent of the explosion is a matter of conjecture."

"Get to the point," she said impatiently.

"Wait. Let me give you the main picture. Such an explosion *would* be serious. It would blow an island, or a hunk of continent, right off the planet. It would shake Cathor from pole to pole, cause earthquakes violent enough to do serious damage on the other side of the planet, and utterly destroy everything within at least one thousand miles of the site of the explosion. And I mean everything.

"So they haven't experimented. They could end the war overnight with controlled U-235 bombs. They could end this cycle of civilization with one or two *uncontrolled* bombs. And they don't know which they'd have if they made 'em. So far, they haven't worked out any way to control the explosion of U-235."

"If you're stalling for time," Ylas said, "it won't do you any good, personally. If we have callers, I'll shoot you where you sit."

"Stalling?" Ybor cried. "I'm trying my damnedest to shorten it. I'm not finished yet. Please don't interrupt. I want to give you the rest of the picture. As you pointed out the Sixa armies are being pushed back to their original starting point: Ynamre. They started out to conquer the world,

and they came close, at one time. But now they are about to lose it. We, the Seilla, would not dare to set off an experimental atomic bomb. This war is a phase, to us; to the Sixa, it is the whole future. So the Sixa are desperate, and Dr. Sitruc has made a bomb with not one, but *sixteen* pounds of U-235 in it. He may have it finished any day. I must find him and destroy that bomb. If it's used, we are lost either way. Lost the war, if the experiment is a success; the world, if not. You, and you alone stand between extinction of the race and continuance."

She seemed to pounce. "You're lying! Destroy it, you say. How? Take it out in a vacant lot and explode it? In a desert? On a high mountain? You wouldn't dare even to drop it in the ocean, for fear it might explode. Once you had it, you'd have ten million tigers by the tail—you wouldn't dare turn loose."

"I can destroy it. Our scientists told me how."

"Let that pass for the moment," she said. "You have several points to explain. First, it seems odd that *you* heard of this, and we haven't. We're much closer to developments than you, across three thousand miles of water."

"Sworb," Ybor said, "is a good man, even if he can't eat sweets. He brought back a drawing of it. Listen, Ylas, time is precious! If Dr. Sitruc finishes that bomb before I find him, it may be taken any time and dropped near our headquarters. And even if it doesn't set off the explosion I've described—though it's almost certain that it would—it would wipe out our southern army and equipment, and we'd lose overnight."

"Two more points need explaining," she went on calmly. "Why *my* grain field? There were others to choose from."

"That was pure accident."

"Perhaps. But isn't that string of accidents suspiciously long when you consider the death of Solraq?"

"I don't know anything about that. I didn't know he was dead."

She was silent. She strode back and forth across the cellar, brows furrowed, smoking nervously. Ybor sat quietly. It was all he could do; even his fingers were in stalls.

"I'm half inclined to believe you," she said finally, "but look at my position. We have a powerful organization here. We've risked our lives, and many of us have died, in building it up. I know how we are hated and feared by the authorities. If you are a Sixa agent, and I concluded that you were by the way you spoke the language, you would go to any length, even to carrying out such an elaborate plot as this might be, to discover our methods and membership. I can't risk all that labor and life on nothing but your word."

"Look at my position," Ybor countered. "I might have escaped from you, in the wood and here, after Sleyg left us. But I didn't dare take the chance. You see, it's a matter of time. There is a definite, though unknown, deadline. Dr. Sitruc may finish that bomb

any time, and screw the fuse in. The bomb may be taken at any time after that and exploded. If I had tried to escape, and you had shot me—and I'm sure you would—it would take weeks to replace me. We may have only hours to work with."

She was no longer calm and aloof. Her eyes had a tortured look, and her hands clenched as if she were squeezing words from her heart: "I can't afford to take the chance."

"You can't afford not to," Ybor said.

Footsteps suddenly pounded overhead. Ylas went rigid, flung a narrowed glance of speculation and suspicion at Ybor, and went out of the cellar. He twisted a smile; she hadn't shot him, as she had threatened.

He sat still, but each nerve was taut, quivering, and raw. What now? Who had arrived? What could it mean for him? Who belonged to that babble upstairs? Whose feet were heavy? He was soon to know, for the footsteps moved to the cellar door, and Ylas preceded the sergeant who had arrived earlier.

"I've got orders to search every place in this vicinity," the sergeant said, "so shut up."

His eyes widened when they fell on Ybor. "Well, well!" he cried. "If it isn't the dummy. Sa-a-ay, you snapped out of it!"

Ybor caught his breath as an idea hit him.

"I was drugged," Ybor said, leaping at the chance for escape. "It's worn off now."

Ylas frowned, searching, he could see, for the meaning in his words. He went on, giving her her cue: "This girl's servant, that big oaf upstairs—"

"He ran out," the sergeant said. "We'll catch him."

"I see. He attacked me last night in the grain field out there, brought me here and drugged me."

"What were you doing in the grain field?"

"I was on my way to see Dr. Sitruc. I have information of the most vital nature for him."

The sergeant turned to Ylas. "What d'ya say, girlie?"

She shrugged. "A stranger, in the middle of the night, what would you have done?"

"Then why didn't you say something about it when I was here a while ago?"

"If he turned out to be a spy, I wanted the credit for capturing him."

"You civilians," the sergeant said in disgust. "Well, maybe this is the guy we're lookin' for. Why did you kill that gun crew?" he snarled at Ybor.

Ybor blinked. "How did you know? I killed them because they were enemies."

The sergeant made a gesture toward his gun. His face grew stormy. "Why, you dirty spy—"

"Wait a minute!" Ybor said. "What gun crew? You mean the Seilla outpost, of course, in Aissu?"

"I mean our gun crew, you rat, in the woods out there."

Ybor blinked again. "I don't know anything about a gun crew out there. "Listen, you've got to take me to Dr. Sitruc at once. Here's the background. I have been in Seilla territory, and I learned something that Dr. Sitruc must know. The outcome of the war depends on it. Take me to him at once, or you'll suffer for it."

The sergeant cogitated. "There's something funny here," he said. "Why have you got him all tied up?"

"For questioning," Ylas answered.

Ybor could see that she had decided to play it his way, but she wasn't convinced. The truth was, as he had pointed out, she could not afford to do otherwise.

The sergeant went into an analytical state which seemed to be almost cataleptic. Presently he shook his massive head. "I can't quite put my finger on it," he said in a puzzled tone. "Every time I get close, I hit a blank . . . what am I saying?" He became crisp, menacing. "What's your name, you?" he spat at Ybor.

Ybor couldn't shrug. He raised his eyebrows. "My papers will say that I am Yenraq Ekor, a newspaper man. Don't let them fool you. I'll give my real name to Dr. Sitruc. He knows it well. You're wasting time, man!" he burst out. "Take me to him at once. You're worse than this stupid female!"

The sergeant turned to Ylas. "Did he tell you why he wanted to see Dr. Sitruc?"

She shrugged again, still with speculative eyes on Ybor. "He just said he had to."

"Well, then," the sergeant demanded of Ybor, "why *do* you want to see him?"

Ybor decided to gamble. This goof might keep him here all day with aimless questioning. He told the story of the bomb, much as he had told it to Ylas. He watched the sergeant's face, and saw that his remarks were completely unintelligible. Good! The soldier, like so many people, knew nothing of U-235. Ybor went into the imaginative and gibberish phase of his talk.

"And so, if it's uncontrolled," he said, "it might destroy the planet, blow it instantly into dust. But what I learned was a method of control, and the Seilla have a bomb almost completed. They'll use it to destroy Ynamre. But if we can use ours first, we'll destroy them. You see, it's a neutron shield that I discovered while I was a spy in the Seilla camps. It will stop the neutrons, released by the explosion, from rocketing about space and splitting mountains. Did you know that one free neutron can crack this planet in half? This shield will confine them to a limited area, and the war is ours. So hurry! Our time may be measured in minutes!"

The sergeant took it all in. He didn't dare not believe, for the picture of destruction which Ybor painted was on such a vast scale that sixteen generations of men like the sergeant would be required to comprehend it.

The sergeant made up his mind.

"Hey!" he yelled toward the cellar door, and three soldiers came in. "Get him out of that. We'll take him to the captain. Take the girl along, too. Maybe the captain will want to ask her some questions."

"But I haven't done anything," Ylas protested.

"Then you got nothing to be afraid of, beautiful. If they let you go, I'll take personal charge of you."

The sergeant had a wonderful leer.

You might as well be fatalistic, Ybor thought as he waited in Dr. Sitruc's anteroom. Certain death could easily await him here, but even so, it was worth the gamble. If he were to be a pawn in a greater game, the greatest game, in fact, so be it.

So far, he had succeeded. And it came to him as he eyed his two guards that final success would result in his own death. He couldn't hope to destroy that bomb and get out of this fortress alive. Those guarded exits spelled finis, if he could even get far enough from this laboratory to reach one of them.

He hadn't really expected to get out alive, he reflected. It was a suicide mission from the start. That knowledge, he knew now, had given plausibility to his otherwise thin story. The captain, even as the sergeant, had not dared to disbelieve his tale. He had imparted verisimilitude to his story of destruction because of his deep and flaming determination to prevent it.

Not that he had talked wildly about neutron shields to the captain. The captain was intelligent, compared to his sergeant. And so Ybor had talked matter-of-factly about heat control, and had made it convincing enough to be brought here by guards who grew more timid with each turn of the lorry's wheels.

Apparently, the story of the bomb was known here at the government experimental laboratories; for all the guards had a haunted look, as if they knew that they would never hear the explosion if something went wrong. All the better, then. If he could take advantage of that fact, somehow, as he had taken advantage of events to date, he might—might—

He shrugged away speculation.

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The guards had sprung to attention as the inner door opened, and a man eyed Ybor.

This was a slender man with snapping dark eyes, an odd-shaped face, and a commanding air. He wore a smock, and from its sleeves extended competent-looking hands.

"So you are the end result," he said dryly to Ybor. "Come in."

Ybor followed him into the laboratory. Dr. Sitruc waved him to a straight, uncomfortable chair, using the gun which was suddenly in his hand as an indicator. Ybor sat, and looked steadily at the other.

"What do you mean, end result?" he asked.

"Isn't it rather obvious?" the doctor asked pleasantly. "Those planes which passed over last night were empty; they went too fast, otherwise. I have been speculating all day on their purpose. Now I see. They dropped you."

"I heard something about planes," Ybor said, "but I didn't see 'em."

Dr. Sitruc raised polite eyebrows. "I'm afraid I do not believe you. My interpretation of events is this: those Seilla planes had one objective, to land an agent here who was commissioned to destroy the uranium bomb. I have known for some time that the Seilla command have known of its existence, and I have wondered what steps they would take to destroy it."

Ybor could see no point in remaining on the defensive. "They are making their own bomb," he said. "But they have a control. I'm here to tell you about it, so that you can use it on our bomb. We have time."

Dr. Sitruc said: "I have heard the reports on you this morning. You made some wild and meaningless statements. My personal opinion is that you are a layman, with only scant knowledge of the subject on which you have been so glib. I propose to find out—before I kill you. Oh, yes," he said, smiling, "you will die in any case. In my present position, knowledge is power. If I find that you actually have knowledge which I do not, I propose that I alone will retain it. You see my point?"

"You're like a god here. That's clear enough from the attitude of the guards."

"Exactly. I have control of the greatest explosive force in world history, and my whims are obeyed as iron commands. If I choose, I may give orders to the High Command. They have no choice but to obey. Now, you—your name doesn't matter; it's assumed, no doubt—tell me what you know."

"Why should I? If I'm going to die, anyway, my attitude is to hell with you. I do know something that you don't, and you haven't time to get it from anybody but me. By the time one of your spies could work his way up high enough to learn what I did, the Sixa would be defeated. But I see no reason to give you the information. I'll sell it to you—for my life."

Ybor looked around the small, shining laboratory while he spoke,

and he saw it. It wasn't particularly large; its size did not account for the stab of terror that struck his heart. It was the fact that the bomb was finished. It was suspended in a shock-proof cradle. Even a bombing raid would not shake it loose. It would be exploded when and where the doctor chose.

"You may well turn white as a sheet," Dr. Sitruc chuckled. "There it is, the most destructive weapon the world has ever known."

Ybor swallowed convulsively. Yes, there it was. Literally the means to an end—the end of the world. He thought wryly that those religionists who still contended that this war would be ended miraculously by divine intervention would never live to call the bomb a miracle. What a shot in the doctrine the explosion would give them if only they could come through it unscathed!

"I turned white," he answered Dr. Sitruc, "because I see it as a blind, uncontrolled force. I see it as the end of a cycle, when all life dies. It will be millennia before another civilization can reach our present stage."

"It is true that the element of chance is involved. If the bomb sets off surrounding matter for any considerable radius, it is quite possible that all animate life will be destroyed in the twinkling of an eye. However, if it does not set off surrounding matter, we shall have won the world. I alone—and now you—know this. The High Command sees only victory in that weapon. But enough of chitchat. You would bargain your life for information on how to control the explosion. If you convince me that you have such knowledge, I'll set you free. What is it?"

"That throws us into a deadlock," Ybor objected. "I won't tell you until I'm free, and you won't free me until I tell."

Dr. Sitruc pursed thin lips. "True," he said. "Well, then, how's this? I shall give the guards outside a note, ordering that you be allowed to leave unmolested after you come through the laboratory door."

"And what's to prevent your killing me in here, once I have told you?"

"I give you my word."

"It isn't enough."

"What other choice have you?"

Ybor thought this over, and conceded the point. Somewhere along the line, either he or Dr. Sitruc would have to trust the other. Since this was the doctor's domain, and since he held Ybor prisoner, it was easy to see who would take the other on trust. Well, it would give him a breathing spell. Time was what he wanted now.

"Write the note," he said.

Dr. Sitruc went to his desk and began to write. He shot glances at Ybor which excluded the possibility of successful attack. Even the quickest spring would be fatal, for the doctor was far enough away to have time to raise his gun and fire. Ybor had a hunch that Dr. Sitruc was an excellent shot. He waited.

Dr. Sitruc summoned a guard,

gave him the note, and directed that Ybor be allowed to read it. Ybor did, nodded. The guard went out.

"Now," Dr. Sitruc began, but broke off to answer his telephone. He listened, nodded, shot a slitted glance at Ybor, and hung up. "Would it interest you to know," he asked, "that the girl who captured you was taken away from guards by members of the Underground?"

"Not particularly," Ybor said. "Except that . . . yes," he cried, "it does interest me. It proves my authenticity. You know how widespread the Underground is, how powerful. It's clear what happened; they knew I was coming, knew my route, and caught me. They were going to torture me in their cellar. I told that sergeant the truth. Now they will try to steal the bomb. If they had it, they could dictate terms."

It sounded a trifle illogical, maybe, but Ybor put all of the earnestness he could into his voice. Dr. Sitruc looked thoughtful.

"Let them try. Now, let's have it."

The tangled web of lies he had woven had caught him now. He knew of no method to control the bomb. Dr. Sitruc was not aware of this fact, and would not shoot until he was. Ybor must stall, and watch for an opportunity to do what he must do. He had gained a point: if he got through that door, he would be free. He must, then, get through the door—with the bomb. And Dr. Sitruc's gun was in his hand.

"Let's trace the reaction," Ybor began.

"The control!" Dr. Sitruc snapped.

Ybor's face hardened. "Don't get tough. My life depends on this. I've got to convince you that I know what I'm talking about, and I can do that by describing the method from the first. If you interrupt, then to hell with you."

Dr. Sitruc's odd face flamed with anger. This subsided after a moment, and he nodded. "Go on."

"Oxygen and nitrogen do not burn—if they did, the first fire would have blown this planet's atmosphere off in one stupendous explosion. Oxygen and nitrogen *will* burn if heated to about three thousand degrees Centigrade, and they'll give off energy in the process. But they don't give off sufficient energy to maintain that temperature—so they rapidly cool, and the fire goes out. If you maintain that temperature artificially—well, you're no doubt familiar with that process of obtaining nitric oxide."

"No doubt," Dr. Sitruc said acidly.

"All right. Now U-235 can raise the temperature of local matter to where it will, uh, 'burn', and give off energy. So let's say we set off a little pinch of U-235. Surrounding matter also explodes, as it is raised to an almost inconceivable temperature. It cools rapidly; within perhaps one-hundred-millionth of a second it is down below the point of ignition. Then maybe

a full millionth of a second passes before it's down to one million degress hot, and a minute or so may elapse before it is visible in the normal sense. Now that visible radiation will represent no more than one-hundred-thousandth of the total radiation at one million degrees—but even so, it would be several hundred times more brilliant than the sun. Right?"

Dr. Sitruc nodded. Ybor thought there was a touch of deference in his nod.

"That's pretty much the temperature cycle of a U-235 plus surrounding matter explosion, Dr. Sitruc. I'm oversimplifying, I guess, but we don't need to go into detail. Now that radiation *pressure* is the stuff that's potent. The sheer momentum, physical pressure of light from the stuff at one million degrees, would amount to tons and tons and *tons* of pressure. It would blow down buildings like a titanic wind if it weren't for the fact that absorption of such appalling energy would volatilize the buildings before they could move out of the way. Right?"

Dr. Sitruc nodded again. He almost smiled.

"All right," Ybor went on. He now entered the phase of this contest where he was guessing, and he'd get no second guess. "What we need is a damper, something to hold the temperature of surrounding matter down. In that way, we can limit the effect of the explosion to desired areas, and prevent it from destroying cities on the opposite side of Cathor. The method of applying the damper depends on the exact mechanical structure of the bomb itself."

Ybor got to his feet easily, and walked across the laboratory to the cradle which held the bomb. He didn't even glance at Dr. Sitruc; he didn't dare. Would he be allowed to reach the bomb? Would an unheard, unfelt bullet reach his brain before he took another step?

When he was halfway across the room, he felt as if he had already walked a thousand miles. Each step seemed to be slow motion, leagues in length. And still the bomb was miles away. He held his steady pace, fighting with every atom of will his desire to sprint to his goal, snatch it and flee.

He stopped before the bomb, looked down at it. He nodded, ponderously. "I see," he said, remembering Sworb's drawings and the careful explanations he had received. "Two cast-iron hemispheres, clamped over the orange segments of cadmium alloy. And the fuse—I see it is in—a tiny can of cadmium alloy containing a speck of radium in a beryllium holder and a small explosive powerful enough to shatter the cadmium walls. Then—correct me if I'm wrong, will you?—the powdered uranium oxide runs together in the central cavity. The radium shoots neutrons into this mass—and the U-235 takes over from there. Right?"

Dr. Sitruc had come up behind Ybor, stood at his shoulder. "Just how do you know so much about that bomb?" he asked with over-

tones of suspicion.

Ybor threw a careless smile over his shoulder. "It's obvious, isn't it? Cadmium stops neutrons, and it's cheap and effective. So you separate the radium and U-235 by thin cadmium walls, brittle so the light explosion will shatter them, yet strong enough to be handled with reasonable care."

The doctor chuckled, "Why, you *are* telling the truth."

Dr. Sitruc relaxed, and Ybor moved. He whipped his short, prehensile tail around the barrel of Dr. Sitruc's gun, yanked the weapon down at the same time his fist cracked the scientist's chin. His free hand wrenched the gun out of Dr. Sitruc's hand.

He didn't give the doctor a chance to fall from the blow of his fist. He chopped down with the gun butt and Dr. Sitruc was instantly unconscious. Ybor stared down at the sprawled figure with narrowed eyes. Dared he risk a shot? No, for the guards would not let him go, despite the doctor's note, without investigation. Well—

He chopped the gun butt down again. Dr. Sitruc would be no menace for some time, anyway. And all Ybor needed was a little time. First, he had to get out of here.

That meant taking the fuse out of the bomb. He went over to the cradle, examined the fuse. He tried to unscrew it. It was too tight. He looked around for a wrench. He saw none. He stood half panic-stricken. Could he afford a search

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for the wrench which would remove the fuse? If anyone came in, he was done for. No, he'd have to get out while he could.

And if anybody took a shot at him, and hit the bomb, it was good-by Cathor and all that's in it. But he didn't dare wait here. And he must stop sweating ice water, stop this trembling.

He picked up the cradle and walked carefully to the door. Outside, in the anteroom, the guards who had brought him here turned white. Blood drained out of their faces like air from a punctured balloon. They stood motionless, except for a slight trembling of their knees, and watched Ybor go out into the corridor.

Unmolested, Dr. Sitruc had said. He was not only unmolested, he was avoided. Word seemed to spread through the building like poison gas on a stiff breeze. Doors popped open, figures hurried out—and ran away from Ybor and his cargo. Guards, scientists, men in uniform, girls with pretty legs, bare-kneed boys—all ran.

To where? Ybor asked with his heart in his mouth. There was no safe place in all the world. Run how they might, as far as they could, and it would catch them if he fell or if the bomb were accidentally exploded.

He wanted a plane. But how to get one, if everybody ran? He could walk to the airport, if he knew where it was. Still, once he was away from these laboratories, any policeman, ignorant of the bomb, could stop him, confiscate the weapon, and perhaps explode it.

He had to retain possession.

The problem was partly solved for him. As he emerged from the building, to see people scattering in all directions, a huge form came out from behind a pillar and took him by the arm. Sleyg Ybor almost cried with terror which became relief.

"Come," Sleyg said. "Ylas want you."

"Get me to a plane!" Ybor said. He thought he'd said it quiety, but Sleyg's yellow eyes flickered curiously at him.

The big man nodded, crooked a finger, and led the way. He didn't seem curious about the bomb. Ybor followed to where a small car was parked at the curb. They climbed in, and Sleyg pulled out into traffic.

So Ylas wanted him, eh? Why? He gave up speculation to watch the road ahead, cradling the bomb in his arms against rough spots.

He heard a plane, and searched for it anxiously. All he needed at this stage was a bombing raid, and a direct hit on this car. They had promised him that no raids would be attempted until they were certain of his success or failure, but brass hats were a funny lot. You never knew what they'd do next, like countermanding orders given only a few minutes before.

Still, no alarm sirens went off, so the plane must be Sixa. Ybor sighed with relief.

They drove on, and Ybor speculated on the huge, silent figure beside him. How had Sleyg known

that he would come out of that building? How had he known he was there? Did the Underground have a pipeline even into Dr. Sitruc's office?

These speculations were useless, too, and he shrugged them away as Sleyg drove out of the city through fields of grain. The Sixa, apparently, were going to feed their armies mush, for he saw no other produce.

Sleyg cut off the main road into a bumpy lane, and Ybor clasped the bomb firmly. "Take it easy," he warned.

Sleyg slowed obediently, and Ybor wondered again at the man's attitude. Ybor did not seem to be a prisoner, yet he was not in command here completely. It was a sort of combination of the two, and it was uncomfortable.

They came to a bare, level stretch of land where a plane stood, props turning idly. Sleyg headed toward it. He brought the car to a halt, motioned Ybor out. He then indicated that Ybor should enter the big plane.

"Give me your tool kit," Ybor said, and the big man got it.

The plane bore Sixa insignia, but Ybor was committed now. If he used the bomb as a threat, he could make anybody do what he liked. Still, he felt a niggling worry.

Just before he stepped on the wing ramp, a shot came from the plane. Ybor ducked instinctively, but it was Sleyg who fell—with a neat hole between his eyes. Ybor

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tensed himself, stood still.

The fuselage door slid back, and a face looked out.

"Solraq!" Ybor cried. "I thought you were dead!"

"You were meant to think it, Ybor. Come on in."

"Wait till I get these tools." Ybor handed the cradle up to the dark man who grinned down at him. "Hold baby," Ybor said. "Don't drop him. If he cries, you'll never hear him."

He picked up the tool kit, climbed into the plane. Solraq waved a command to the pilot, and the plane took off. Ybor went to work gingerly on the fuse while Solraq talked.

"Sleyg was a cutie," he said. "We thought he was an ignorant ape. He was playing a big game, and was about ready to wind it up. But, when you named me for identification, he knew that he'd have to turn in his report, because we could have sent you directly to Dr. Sitruc, and helped you. Sleyg wasn't ready yet, so he reported me dead. Then he had the soldiers come and search the house, knowing you'd be found and arrested. He got into trouble when that skirt-chasing sergeant decided to take Ylas along. He had to report that to others of the Underground, because he had to have one more big meeting held before he could get his final dope.

"You see, he'd never turned in a report," Solraq went on. "He was watched, and afraid to take a chance. When Ylas and I got together, we compared notes, searched his belongings, and found the evidence. Then we arranged this rendevouz—if you got away. She told Sleyg where you were, and to bring you here. I didn't think you'd get away, but she insisted you were too ingenious to get caught. Well, you did it, and that's all to the good. Not that it would have mattered much. If you'd failed, we'd have got hold of the bomb somehow, or exploded it in Dr. Sitruc's laboratory."

Ybor didn't bother to tell him that it didn't matter where the bomb was exploded. He was too busy trying to prevent it's exploding here. At last he had the fuse out. He motioned Solraq to open the bomb bay. When the folding doors dropped open, he let the fuse fall between them.

"Got it's teeth pulled," he said, "and we'll soon empty the thing."

He released the clamps and pulled the hemispheres apart. He took a chisel from the tool kit and punched a hole in each of the cadmium cans in succession, letting the powder drift out. It would fall, spread, and never be noticed by those who would now go on living.

They would live because the war would end before Dr. Sitruc could construct another bomb. Ybor lifted eyes that were moist.

"I guess that's it," he said. "Where are we going?"

"We'll parachute out and let this plane crash when we sight our ship some fifty miles at sea. We'll report for orders now. This mission's accomplished."

THE END.